Working With Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:01:10

You've probably tuned into the fact by now that meditation is basically all about the mind. The body is important. The five senses are important. They're a good basis for mindfulness. It's important to understand how we suffer in relation to hanging on to them. But really what we're here to do is to learn about the mind because it's in the mind that we suffer through difficult states—states like fear and anger, embarrassment and humiliation and loneliness and despair. And it's through the mind that we also find the beautiful states, the skillful states of mind, which is how we become liberated. States like mindfulness and wisdom, compassion, joy, contentment, and love.

So fundamentally, what we're here for is to understand this whole range of what goes through our minds, both on the affective level—the level of emotionality or feelings—and also on the cognitive level, the level of understanding. Both these levels are critical to the development of the practice.

I want to talk tonight specifically about working with the range of difficult emotions that come into the mind. You'll see that as we go through the retreat, although we begin talking more about the difficult, as you get settled in, that's what the experience tends to be. And then after you're settled in for a while, we start to talk more about the beautiful states because that's what begins to arise more frequently. So we're still in the early stages of this half, and the talks tend to be loaded on the difficult, but that will start to change.

When I came into meditation practice, it was because of suffering, which I think is more common than not. I was surprised to find that some people come in out of mere curiosity, because I didn't see why anybody would put up with this just out of some intellectual questioning, but apparently there are people who do. I came in because of suffering, and I thought, having read the publicity, that enlightenment would get rid of that. Specifically, I thought that if I could get enlightened, I'd get rid of those difficult and painful emotions that I was grappling with in my life.

It took me quite a few years to realize—I think I was a slow learner—that in fact I had to learn to be comfortable with those states before I had any chance of becoming enlightened. The order of things got quite reversed in my understanding.

Once we're comfortable with all the different places that our mind can go, all the different states that it can move into, then we've found a huge amount of ease and comfort in living this life within this body. It's not the same as liberation, but it brings a lot of freedom. So in a kind of flippant way, you might say that this is like becoming enlightened before we're enlightened—to develop this sort of ease with the whole range of mental states that can come to us.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, grisly, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing."

There's a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method. The beautiful thing is that meditation not only gives us the method, but we find out we have the capability to do this—to investigate all the corners of the mind and to come to a degree of understanding and acceptance in relation to them. This is a big part of the joy of discovery of the path of meditation.

I don't know about you, but when I began this path, I wasn't very familiar with this inner landscape. I don't think our culture is very good at training us in this inner landscape. And I'm not talking just about the culture not telling me how to develop one-pointed states of mind and achieve the third jhāna. It didn't tell me how to know when I was feeling hurt, when I was feeling angry, when I was feeling embarrassed or loving or happy or what any of that meant. So for me, it was not until I came into Dharma practice that I was pointed to looking and inquiring into that inner landscape using the map that the Buddha provided, and coming to greatly appreciate the range that is contained within this human mind, within every human mind. A range that includes very difficult and painful areas, but that also, as you start to open it up and become comfortable, unveils a lot of treasures—understanding of loving-kindness, of compassion and joy, and so forth.

But until we begin this exploration, there are generally, for us as adults, places where we get stuck in difficult corners of the mind. Or it could be we're stuck from clinging to beautiful corners of the mind. Both of those experiences happened to me as I was growing up, and I didn't know how to navigate my way out of them.

Children don't seem to have much stuckness in the range of their mind. Unless they've been abused in some way or their trust has been deeply betrayed, children seem to have this fearlessness in relation to their emotional life. You watch a couple of kids playing, and they'll be joyful and enthusiastic and excited one moment, and they'll be fighting the next—screaming at each other and kicking and pulling hair. And then two minutes later, they'll be playing happily together again. They just flow through all those different states without holding back. Their emotional range doesn't scare them.

But as adults, we seem to have hit some dark corners, and because of that, we've shrunk back from our emotional range. We've become afraid of some corners of our mind, and once we start to close down on one corner of the mind, it exerts a dampening effect on the whole range. So we may start by closing off some of the difficult emotions, but we find as we do that, we close the heart overall and the beautiful emotions are no longer quite so available.

The journey of meditation is a way of reclaiming some of that terrain—that wide terrain that the heart contains that we've lost touch with given the bumps of growing up.

As we start to explore the range, the first impulse, I think, for most of us is that we think spiritual practice is going to help us get rid of the difficult. We hope that through the cultivation of bliss and peace and loving-kindness, we can just kind of glide over the top and end up on some really nice spiritual plane where we don't have to deal with that other stuff anymore. As you know, this is not the path of insight meditation. So congratulations for still being here once you found this out.

This is again from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like the way reality is now and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run a hundred miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive. Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know."

So this is our encouragement to look at all the areas of the mind and find out what we can learn from them.

Tonight I'd like to talk about these difficult areas, and I want to introduce it through the context of the Third Foundation of Mindfulness. In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha talked about the four areas in which we establish mindfulness: body, feeling tone or vedanā, the third foundation which is citta, and the fourth foundation called the dhammas, or the principles of nature.

The third foundation of citta is the one that relates to the talk this evening. Citta is a wonderful word in Pali that can be translated as mind. Primarily it gets translated as mind, but it's sometimes translated as heart. The reason is that it includes both cognitive and affective workings of the mind. It seems when the Buddha taught, he didn't see such a polarity between what we sometimes call heart and what we call mind—the mental and the affective were all together, united in his view. So one translator said the best way to translate citta is psyche, a word that encompasses both sides of our mind's nature.

This is the beginning of the description of the third foundation from the Satipaṭṭhāna: "And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind? Here, a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred, and mind unaffected by hatred as mind unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion."

So here are our old friends of desire, hatred, and delusion, and their opposites—the absence of desire, hatred, and delusion. These three states, which the Buddha referred to as the roots of the wholesome and the roots of the unwholesome, combine to make up all the different kinds of mind states that occur, the whole range. You can take any kind of mind state that comes and look within it for some combination of these three qualities in their wholesome or unwholesome manifestations. Citta is the word in the sutta for this range of mental experiences.

Just a word on the way that I tend to use the language around this subject. I often talk about emotions and the understanding of emotions. Here I mean strong experiences like joy, happiness, love, fear, grief, depression, and so on. I put those in the realm of emotions. Then I might also use the word mood to describe emotional qualities that are not quite as strong. For instance, you might just wake up one day and feel a little bit of melancholy. It might not be quite strong enough to call a really strong emotion, but it's a pervasive tone in the mind. Or you might feel very tender, and the tenderness is like a pervasive coloring in the mind—that's what I would call a mood.

But there's a third term that I'll often use that is very common in the tradition: mind states, mental states, or states of mind. This includes not only emotions and moods, but also the refined qualities of mind that we understand and develop through meditation—qualities like mindfulness, concentration, equanimity, calm, compassion, renunciation. These may not be strong enough to be called emotions; sometimes they're quite refined. But I lump these into a big category called states of mind. Everything that goes on in the mind of this nature can be placed in this third category. In Buddhist language, you'll also hear these talked about as mental factors.

We'll have many things to say later about wholesome states of mind. For now, I just want to mention two things. One, don't cling, as I think you know. Two, please be sure to appreciate them. They are wonderful visitors when they come. Don't take them for granted. Sometimes I'd notice contentment and think, "Well, of course that's contentment. That's what I came for." And then I'd space out. Really take the time to connect mindfully to the beautiful states of mind as well as the difficult.

With difficult states of mind, we need two things through meditation primarily. One is an attitude shift that moves from wanting to get rid of these states to accepting or even welcoming them. Because these are the areas where we are bound, and if we can develop a curiosity and a real interest in them, then we can actually welcome the opportunity to see them. We would rather see the places we're caught so that there's the possibility of release than have them operate subconsciously where we're simply bound by them. The second movement is a greater understanding of their nature. We have to develop wisdom, and it's ultimately the wisdom that brings the sense of freedom in relationship to them.

So the first step in working with difficult mind states is to know what it is that we're feeling. This is part of that exploration that meditation leads us into. We can become very refined in our discrimination, our ability to tell the difference between related, close states of mind.

Fear was my big exploration for many years in practice, so I got familiar with the varieties: nervousness, anxiety, fear, panic, terror. There's quite a range that that word points to. Or we come to understand the subtle differences between happiness and contentment, for example. The difference between calm and equanimity. Our inner mindfulness has a wonderfully nuanced appreciation of the whole range of qualities that arise, and we just have to start exercising it to get to know what's in us.

So the first step is knowing what our state of mind is as it's happening. But this is not so easy. It sounds

easy, but it's not so easy.

I'll give you an example from my practice. I was practicing in this hall on a three-month course some years ago. I'd come for part two, and I'd been settled in for about two weeks at that point. I had gotten into the rhythm of the schedule, doing my sittings and my walking. I like to walk outside, so every walking period I would go down and walk on a path that's on the grassy area at the south end of the property. Every day for two weeks during the walking periods, I'd been walking there.

The sitting ended—I think it was the 8:15 sit. I left the hall. I was walking very mindfully at that point, two weeks settled in: lifting, moving, placing. Walked out the back door. Lifting, moving, placing. I looked down to my walking path, and there was somebody there.

I couldn't believe it. I thought, what is this person doing on my walking path? I've been walking there every period for two weeks. Haven't they been observing? Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. I felt very present. And I kept thinking, they didn't notice. They're not very developed, are they? Lifting, moving, placing. And then I wondered, are they playing mind games with me? Did I cut in front of them in the breakfast line this morning? Is this their revenge? Lifting, moving, placing.

And what was happening, of course, is that I was annoyed. I was very judgmental, and I was angry. Lifting, moving, placing. I walked down, picked another path. Guess what? It worked just as well. I did my walking period near the person, and it was thirty minutes into the walking before I realized: I'm angry.

Until I realized that, I was so bound up with my reactive irritation that I couldn't dislodge it. It was stuck. There was an identification. That was the truth, and there was no way of moving or shifting it. Even though I thought I was very mindful in being with my feet, I missed the biggest thing that was going on: I was pissed off.

This seems to be partly how we miss what's happening. These hindering qualities slip in under the radar. We have our mindfulness antennae up, but these slip in underneath, take us over, put a filter over our eyes and our whole view of the world—and we don't see that it's happening. The first movement has to be recognizing that the filter is in place, that the mind state is there. As soon as I said, "Oh, anger," then it became workable. I knew how to work with anger. I knew how to feel it in my body, how to feel it in my mind, and then I could start to release it.

In fact, take note: any time you name an emotion, that simple act of naming it, there's a shift that starts to happen in your relationship to it. Because now it is not totally dominating the interior landscape.

There is the emotion, and there is mindfulness. So in the middle of that difficulty, you've brought in a very wholesome quality of mind. And it is this awareness that you can trust at that point to provide the door to wisdom, the door to spaciousness around the emotion. Even naming it makes a difference.

A few people have mentioned how mindfulness is becoming more and more mainstream in society. It's

moving into stress reduction, into cognitive therapy, and there are many experiments people are working with. One researcher took a group of people who had anger management issues, and the only instruction they gave them was to simply name anger every time it came up. They watched the subjects over several weeks and evaluated their experience, and they found that outbursts of uncontrollable anger dropped sharply just because of the prescription of naming what was happening to them. This is a powerful first step—to know what the mind state is. This puts us into the quality of mindfulness.

The second step, then, is to feel it. Feel it in your body, first of all. If the emotion has any strength, it will express itself through the body. If you ground your attention in the body where you're feeling it, you can stay in touch with the sensations and also the emotion. What I'd recommend is going back and forth—feeling the sensation (with anger, there may be contraction, pressure), and then going and touching the mood itself, the emotion itself, which is a quality of the mind.

Now, it's one integrated experience. Body and mind are so closely related that we can't pull them apart. When a strong emotion comes, the impact is felt as one unitive experience, but it has two aspects—one physical, one mental or emotional. As you investigate the emotion, go back and forth between tuning into the physical—contraction, pressure, tightness—and then the way it feels in the mind. Get to know that mental quality of anger. For me, it was something like a burning going on in the mind. As you ground the attention in the body, it will help you stay in touch. Several people have said that trying to stay in touch with an emotion is difficult because emotions are kind of cloud-like. But if it's felt in the body, that provides a good grounding point.

Then there's one other area you want to tune into to get the complete picture of the emotion, and that's the area of thoughts. Notice when you're angry what kinds of thoughts you tend to think. This starts to make up what I would call the storyline. Any difficult emotion has a storyline underneath it. The storyline in my walking path scenario was that it was *my* walking path. They were wrong and I was right. Once I could see that belief, I saw that that's what held the anger in—that's what locked it in. And once I could let go of the belief—that walking path did not have my name on it, in fact; it had not been leased to me; it was still open ground—once I saw the belief and could let it go, the anger couldn't sustain itself.

So as we talk about the difficult emotions, I want to point out the different storylines that come in. The Buddha talked about the five hindrances that can obstruct our meditation unfolding. Shaila talked about those last week in a very helpful way. These are essential to get to know—how they manifest in your practice. On the level of difficult emotions, I work with a slightly different list, with some overlap, of the main five strong emotions that I've worked with myself and that I see meditators working with a lot. That list for me is sadness, desire, anger, fear, and self-judgment. Sally talked a lot about self-judgment, so I'm not going to spend a lot of time on that tonight, but I do want to touch on the other four.

As I started to investigate—especially desire, fear, sadness, and anger—I found there was a very interesting relationship here to past and future. Something to note about the afflictive emotions is that

they are connected with time. Afflictive emotions depend on past and future in some way to sustain them. Beautiful emotions do not. A beautiful emotion can be a sense of appreciation for the present moment that expresses itself in joy, in mudita. But to sustain an afflictive emotion, there has to be a link to past or future.

So I want to ask you all to reflect on this. The other factor is whether the object is pleasant or unpleasant—pleasurable or painful. Let me ask you to reflect: if there has been a pleasurable experience located in the past—these are the two axes, pleasant and unpleasant, past and future—a pleasant experience that occurred in the past, and by that we assume it's no longer in the present...

What's the emotion that evokes? Let yourself feel into it.

Let me put it a different way. What painful emotion could be evoked? Sadness. This is the quality of loss, isn't it? There was something that was pleasant in the past. We don't have it any longer. There's a sense of loss, and that's the condition for sadness to arise. It doesn't have to, but that's the condition on which sadness builds.

What if there was an unpleasant experience in the past? What might the mind respond to in that case? Anger. Judgment. Yes, anger or judgment, which are both different forms of aversion. So anger is a link to the past, to something that was experienced as unpleasant.

Now we go into the future. What's the relationship to what's pleasurable in the future? Desire. It's wanting, isn't it? And if something is unpleasant in the future, how does the mind often relate? Fear.

I think this is why these are four such primal emotions. They map past and future, pleasant and unpleasant. I didn't realize that when I came up with the list, but having come up with it from seeing my practice and seeing lots of people's practice, it just made sense in this kind of matrix.

So let's talk first about the quality of desire. We've talked around it. Sharda talked about it the other night. It is one of the hindrances—basically, the movement of mind that wants a pleasant experience and wants it now. This can be a very frequent visitor on a retreat. We start off and perhaps it's pleasant experiences that we left at home that we'd like to have again. We miss people, we miss places, we miss certain food or drink or whatever. As the retreat progresses, we find ourselves wanting the experiences of the retreat itself. We have a yearning, a strong wish for a pleasant sitting, a comfortable body experience, a mental state of calm or peace, some particular insight that might have come along, an opening to compassion or love. So it could be external or internal, but let's look at the way that desire functions.

A few years ago, Carol and Sally and I went to Italy and taught a ten-day retreat there. It was a great experience. I'd never taught in Italy before. I really appreciated the yogis there because, you know, all the stereotypes you have about Italians? They all seemed true on the retreat. Noble silence didn't exactly apply in the same way as it does here. People had cell phones and talked in between. One gentleman from Sicily had brought his seventy-year-old mother on the retreat, and since she was Catholic, they had to stay

in touch. There was an espresso machine right outside the dining hall, so always after meals the lira were going in, the espresso was being drunk. In fact, the staff, which was from a convent we rented for the retreat, had a little different understanding of retreat than we do here. When we showed up for dinner the first night, there were carafes of wine out at all the tables. So rather reluctantly we had to tell them to put those away.

But what I really enjoyed about teaching in Italy was the emotional openness that the yogis had. We had to work through a translator because we didn't speak Italian and many people didn't speak English, so it was a little awkward—there was always a third person in the room. But I found people were, in general, very willing to open up about the difficult things going on in their lives, and they had a lot of fluency around their emotions. They were much more willing to dive in and be with the emotional range than I had been in my practice.

There was one young man there, probably about thirty, who came in for his first interview. I said, "How's it going?" And he said, "Oh, having a hard time."

"I don't really want to be here," he said.

"Well, why are you here?" I asked.

"This is our holiday time—August. Some friends of mine were going to the Caribbean for vacation and they invited me to go with them. So I had to choose between going to the Caribbean or coming on this meditation retreat."

"Why did you choose to come here?"

"All the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out."

So he definitely got the consolation prize—sitting and walking for ten days.

"You know, I think about my friends," he said. "They're out on the beach there. The water's so warm. It's beautiful. There are many beautiful girls in the Caribbean. And I'm here."

Well, it was no wonder he couldn't settle.

So we talked about how the force of desire works. When desire is present, is it satisfying? I think this is a very interesting question to investigate, and you'll find many opportunities to examine it. When we're on retreat and deprived of pleasant things, one of the things the mind does is go into fantasy or daydream or recollection about things that have brought us pleasure. And in that, there is a measure of comfort, a measure of gratification. This is real—we bring the memory of something pleasurable into the mind, projecting it into the future, wanting to have it.

But along with this gratifying aspect, there's also always a feeling of unfulfillment because it's not here now. Because of that inherent frustration, there's something inherently unsatisfying in wanting. When

we're in wanting, we can't get settled into the present moment.

This is what I talked about with the yogi on that retreat. He went away and practiced. The next time I saw him for an interview, he had seen that. He'd let go of the Caribbean. He was in the retreat, and he was enjoying it.

Desire is largely about a willingness to see its frustrating nature, to realize the only possibility for contentment is in direct contact with the present moment—and so in letting go of the wanting.

The storyline in desire is something like, "If I had that, I would be happy." It creates the projection of a future happiness. One of the things we don't often inquire into is: how long will that happiness last? Somehow there's this bloom in the mind from desire that makes it seem like it's really going to be a permanent happiness. And we forget about impermanence—that either the thing changes, like an ice cream cone or like sex, or our attitude changes, like toward a new house or a new relationship. Eventually the bloom goes off the rose in one way or another, from without or from within.

When desire is present on retreat, I often find it first in myself—if it's toward meditation objects—by this kind of leaning forward movement in my body, a tension that's like reaching out to grab some concentration or grab some peace. Sometimes it's very hard for me to notice through thoughts or images what I'm striving for in practice. But if I find the body in some tension, then that's often a clue that I'm looking for some kind of meditation experience. And if I can then tune into that, it gives a possibility of releasing.

We talked a little about anger already. Anger is one particular form of aversion—there will probably be another talk on aversion later in the retreat, and Sharda spoke about it with the hindrances. It's the basic attitude of disliking or negativity, but it has so many different forms: ill will, hatred, impatience, frustration, irritation, fear, judgment, blame, resentment, despair, resistance. So many different forms.

Sometimes the mind gets stuck in a long-term habit of aversion. Nothing is ever good enough. This can come out of a chronic sense of fear, a kind of projection that the world is threatening. It can come out of cynicism, where the attitude toward things has become negative. It can come out of a long-term habit of anger.

When aversion has settled in chronically in the heart, the experience becomes contracted and we're really shut off from any opening to joy and happiness and contentment. For myself, coming into practice when fear was a strong tendency in my mind, my heart had become shrunken due to that. One of the things especially recommended when the mind is governed by aversion is the practice of mettā, loving-kindness. In the suttas, loving-kindness is the classical antidote for aversion.

So whether it's coming out of hatred or out of fear, metta is a very useful practice for the aversive temperament.

In anger, generally take a look and see how it feels in the body—there will be contraction, tightness, constriction, tension, often felt in the shoulders, neck, and chest. Take a look at the quality in the mind. See what the coloring or the mood of anger is. As I said, for myself, it was felt as some kind of burning. And then see how the thoughts go. Typically with anger, the thoughts go to blaming. The storyline, you might say, is something like, "They're wrong." And by making them wrong, we get to be right.

But notice how every blaming thought adds more fuel to the fire. As we're angry and we keep thinking the same blaming thoughts over and over again, notice how the flames keep getting fed and keep flaming up. If we cut the thoughts or the storyline, then there's no more fuel being added to the fire, and it will have to die down. So either you can simply stop thinking blaming thoughts, or at an even more fundamental level, you can let go of that story, that belief that the other person is wrong.

It's a judgment call. Sometimes the other person may be wrong. Awful things happen in the world. On a global level, there are murders and war and racism and oppression. Even in our personal lives, living in a fairly protected part of the world, people might steal from us or really hurt us through speech or mistreat us in some way that is thoughtless and unkind. So sometimes people definitely are unskillful. But as long as we're hanging on to that view, who's hurting? Of course, it's us.

There's this lovely story from the Dalai Lama. He is in the habit of receiving the refugees who make their way out of Tibet and come into India. Once he was visited by a monk who had been in prison for twenty years under the Chinese in Tibet. The Dalai Lama had actually known this monk before fleeing Tibet, and he thought he was a fairly ordinary monk at the time. So this monk shows up, having escaped from prison and made it over the Himalayas. The Dalai Lama asked him how he was. The monk said, "I'm okay now, but I was worried because I was in danger." The Dalai Lama said, "Well, of course, you must have been in danger of being tortured." And the monk said, "Yes, I was tortured, but that's not what I meant. I meant that I was in danger of becoming angry. But I didn't, because I had my practice of compassion. I didn't become angry." The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of that monk considerably after that.

I find it useful to reflect on things like this when somebody cuts me off on the freeway—that people who have suffered much worse are able to keep their hearts and minds clear, even in the face of aggression and mistreatment.

Once anger came up strongly for me while I was doing a metta retreat here. It was very interesting. "May everybody be happy. May everybody be peaceful." Then there's my difficult person—and I would spin out for thirty minutes being angry at this person who happened to be on the retreat. It was a wonderful opportunity to observe the process because I saw that I was the one burning with the anger. I also saw that part of the anger, a component of it, was ill will. And ill will, if you look into it, means the will to have the other person feel ill—that is, to have the other person hurt.

I couldn't accept the idea that I wanted to hurt somebody else, that I would enjoy somebody else's suffering. That's one of the things that motivated me to let go of the anger. But equally important was that

I was the one suffering with it. They didn't know I was upset. They were just going merrily about their practice.

So I came to see that I had this ill will with which I wanted to hurt someone else, and I understood these two analogies from the texts. One is that anger is like a lump of hot coal that we pick up to throw at somebody—but before it hits them, we burn our own hands. The second is that being angry at somebody is like drinking poison and hoping the other person gets sick.

It usually doesn't work.

So can we just open to feel the feeling of anger in the body, feel that mood in the mind, look closely at the thoughts, see how the thoughts just keep adding to the fire? And through the knowing of that unpleasantness, the pain of that fire, let go. Let go of the thoughts, let go of the story about it.

Sally talked a lot about self-judgment, so I won't go into that. Another form of aversion, very helpful to inquire into—also through the three areas that we mentioned of body, of mind, and of thoughts.

The next of the difficult emotions is sadness. Sadness can be an intimidating force to open into because often there's a belief that if we open to the amount of sadness that's in our life, we'll be overwhelmed by it. We'll drown in it. We won't be able to come out of it. Everybody's had disappointments in life. Everybody can tune in to some degree of sadness if they look. But sometimes the losses are big, and it leaves this undigested mass of sadness.

So as we come into meditation and begin to touch that, sometimes it's frightening. The size of it can feel frightening. But this sense—"if I open to it, I'll never come out of it again"—is just a belief. It's just another story. And it's not true. Because all emotions, if we give them space, will exhibit impermanence. It's their nature. It's the nature of all dhammas.

So we just have to trust a little bit at a time. Open to it a bit, experience it a bit, let it lighten a bit, take the mind somewhere else. A little bit at a time we open up to the quality of sadness or disappointment. Again, feel it in the body, get to know it in the mind, take a look at the storyline. And under sadness, it's something like: "I can't be happy now because I've lost this." That's the meaning of the story of loss. "I can't be happy now because of this particular loss."

It's so interesting that all kinds of grief—and you can read this in all the literature about death and dying—have a certain timeline. They go through their own cycles, and the intense heaviness of grief, if we allow it, will in time pass. There may still be some lingering sadness, but it becomes much more bearable if we allow ourselves to open to the intensity of grief in a way that is not holding back.

The last of the major states I wanted to touch on is the quality of fear, because this was kind of my specialty for a lot of years in practice. It's one I have a special affection for. When I first started to encounter fear in meditation, it was totally overwhelming to me. And the first reaction I had when it came

was more fear. I didn't know how to relate to it, and I was scared of the experience itself.

So for me, it was very helpful and very instructive to hear the direction: feel it in the body. I started to open to the experience of fear in the body, and I found that there was a contraction in the belly. There was a flutteriness all through the torso, and there was a kind of shaking or light quality that didn't feel grounded and didn't feel secure.

So I would investigate each of those areas, and the question I had in mind was: can I bear this? Can I bear this sensation? The storyline in fear is something like: "This moment is bearable, but the next one's not going to be. Watch out." So coming back just into the present moment diffuses that past-future orientation. That's why it's so helpful—the mindfulness just of the present moment.

So with fear, it was: don't worry about the next moment. Come into this moment. Is it bearable? And as I looked at each of the body sensations, I found, yeah, I can bear that. I don't like it. It's not pleasant, but I can bear it.

Then after getting comfortable with the body sensations, I kind of worked up the nerve to look into the mind. And that was even harder. What's the tone or the quality of the mind that is fear? It's a hard thing to describe, but for me it was a sort of panicky wanting to get away from. And you could call this the flight response. The mind wanted to move away from that experience. It was hard to touch that directly because it wanted to move away from that feeling too.

But through the stability of mind that comes through meditation, I was able to bring the attention, bring the mindfulness directly into contact with that fleeing impulse and feel it. And I thought, can I bear this? Yeah, I can bear this too.

And then, strangely enough, the next moment was not unbearable. The storyline was a lie. The next moment was actually easier once I started to open up.

So I kept investigating fear. It was a companion for a number of years in practice, quite a frequent visitor. And at some point, I'd made a lot of headway in becoming more comfortable, but then—maybe it was a talk of Joseph's, I'm not sure—the question came into my mind: Am I really accepting this?

And then the reflection that followed was: if I really accepted it, it would be okay with me if it lasted the rest of my life. That would be real acceptance.

And I asked myself, am I okay if this lasts the rest of my life? I said, hell no. No way.

And then I had to look at that. Okay, why not? So I looked: why would I not be okay? I can bear this feeling. And the thoughts that came to me were: if I was in fear like this, then I couldn't really enjoy music the way I used to be able to enjoy it. I couldn't really enjoy a sunset the way I used to be able to enjoy it. I couldn't really be in love the way I used to be in love. And then what I noticed was, oh, these are all the ways I used to get high.

So why was I resisting the fear? Because I still wanted to get high in that old way. I thought, is that worth it? No. It was more important to me to open fully to fear than to hold out some future promise of getting high. Because if I could open to the fear, I would have a mind that was unafraid of fear. I would have a mind that was rich in equanimity. And that became more interesting to me and more valuable than the highs that my mind was throwing up.

So at that point I said, yeah, it's okay if this lasts the rest of my life.

And then I continued to practice quite a while like that. Fear would occasionally come, and I developed a complete equanimity over whether it was present or whether it was absent. It really didn't matter to me either way. And when that happened, fear lost its grip on me in some way. It's not that it doesn't return. And every time it returns, I need to refine that relationship with it. But it cannot terrorize me. And it cannot oppress me the way that it used to—as far as I know. I haven't lived a full life yet, so I'll give you a status report as we go. But I feel that something shifted so deeply in my relationship to it that I know how to relate with it. I know how to work with it when it's there.

So fundamentally, what transforms us in our relationship with these states is coming to understand how they're put together. We see the component that is physical. We see the component that is the mood or coloring in the mind. We see how thoughts build them and sustain them. And then also how the absence of thought causes them to crumble. Once we see how these states are put together, they don't mystify us as much and they don't enchant us as much. They arise, and we start to see them just as part of nature.

Just as we observe physical nature and see it's always changing—body sensations pulsing on and off, vibrating—we see that mental nature, which we all share, also comes and goes. All these states are transitory. That's why it's safe to open. You don't have to hold back, because anything that comes, you don't have to make it go away. It will go away on its own. It's the repression that locks them in. So as long as we open, they'll come, they'll manifest, and they'll go. They are just part of our human nature.

We all have this whole package. Everybody knows what fear is. Everybody knows what contentment is. Everybody knows what sadness is. It's not yours or mine. It's part of our human, biological, mental, emotional heritage. So we don't have to take it personally. We simply allow nature to come, to present itself. We understand it through our interest, through our investigation, through our curiosity, through our openness. The mind loses its conflict, loses its struggle with these states.

It takes some time because the mind is very wide and rich. It takes time to investigate each one. This is not a transformation that happens overnight. But through the consistency of our meditation practice, through openness to the range of experiences, little by little, corner by corner, nook by cranny, we start to understand the whole terrain.

In the beginning, I thought that awakening would come after all these states had been disposed of. When I get rid of them, then I can wake up. I have to be comfortable before I can wake up. But I realized it's quite

the other way around. We wake up in the middle of these states.

Every time one of these states arises, you might notice your habitual reaction is, "I don't want it. I'm going to push it away. I'm going to strive for something beautiful." Aversion and greed. We start to see this doesn't work. And then we find we have the capacity to turn on this light of mindfulness—of interest, of investigation, of acceptance, of courage, of patience, of tolerance. All these are the beautiful states of mind that we generate from this contact with what's difficult and painful. As we're generating them, we are waking up in the middle of our difficulties.

In a way, these difficult states of mind are the training ground for us to unpack the box of treasures—the beautiful states that support us, strengthen us, and ultimately lift the mind to liberation. It is through knowing our delusion and the difficult emotions that we really grow the seeds of the beautiful qualities of heart and mind.

I want to close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition. This is called The Four Blessings of Gampopa. Gampopa was a disciple of Milarepa, an eleventh-century practitioner revered as one of the greatest saints in the Tibetan tradition. This quality of blessings you can interpret as you like—it could be directed toward a higher power, it could be directed toward an individual like the Dalai Lama, it could be directed toward your own inner strength and wisdom. You can make of it what you like.

These are the Four Blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessings so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessings so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.